

A WHITE STREAK & DISASTER

Visit to Office Develops the White Streak and Strange Chain of Dire Disaster Is Precipitated.

THE SYNOPSIS.

John Grafton, who owns almost all of Kenyonville, which he built up on a large tract of practically worthless land left him by his father, receives a visit from James Elsford, an old friend. During the evening they visit the club and while there Grafton tells his friend of how success came to him and how he had mortgaged about all he had to back one George Colson in building a traction line. Then he takes Elsford down to see his modern office building, arriving there about 11 p. m.

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CHAPTER II (Continued).

A Streak of White.

"No; it's not. Just about the time we begin to feel positive that all is well, something usually happens." Grafton turned to him with an expression of mock hopelessness.

"Jim, I'm afraid that something's wrong with you—you seem to have a sort of croaking fit on this evening."

"Not at all, but—"

"And the best way to dispel it will be to come along now and see the trimmest suite of offices in the whole establishment—my own. Just switch on the current, Parker, will you? I'll take Mr. Elsford up in the elevator."

The watchman traveling noiselessly in his felt-soled shoes, moved away to the rear of the lower corridor. A switch snapped down, and he called:

"All right, sir."

"All right, Parker."

Grafton stepped into the elevator and pointed silently to the quietly decorated sides.

"Ever see anything neater, Jim?"

"Never. I'll own up to it."

He shifted the controller, and the little car glided noiselessly up the long shaft.

There was not a jar, not a hitch. If all things in the Grafton building worked as perfectly as the lifts, her owner had just cause for pride.

"Second!" he announced playfully.

"Out sir!"

"Thank you, no," laughed Elsford.

"I'm going up to see the proprietor of the building."

"Ninth floor, then. And—look here!" Grafton broke in enthusiastically.

"Just suppose, for the fun of the thing, that all the holding machinery should give way at once."

"Thank you, I'm not particularly anxious to."

"Oh, you won't be killed—that's what I want to demonstrate. Now, here we are between the second and third floors. By throwing off this clutch, I can release, practically, everything that holds us up. See? And having done that, this emergency brake steps right in automatically and stops the descent within three feet at the outside. Hold your breath, Jim."

The car, starting upward gently, suddenly dropped. Elsford gasped aloud, and then shut his teeth together quite abruptly.

With a loud snap the car had stopped hardly a yard below its original position.

"There!" laughed Grafton, as the echo of the sound died away through the empty building. "That's the only case in which these cars make a sound. Come here and see how it works."

Elsford bent over with him, and for a minute or two Grafton pointed out this or that bit of mechanism and explained its manner of working. When he straightened up again the car moved slowly toward the ninth story once more.

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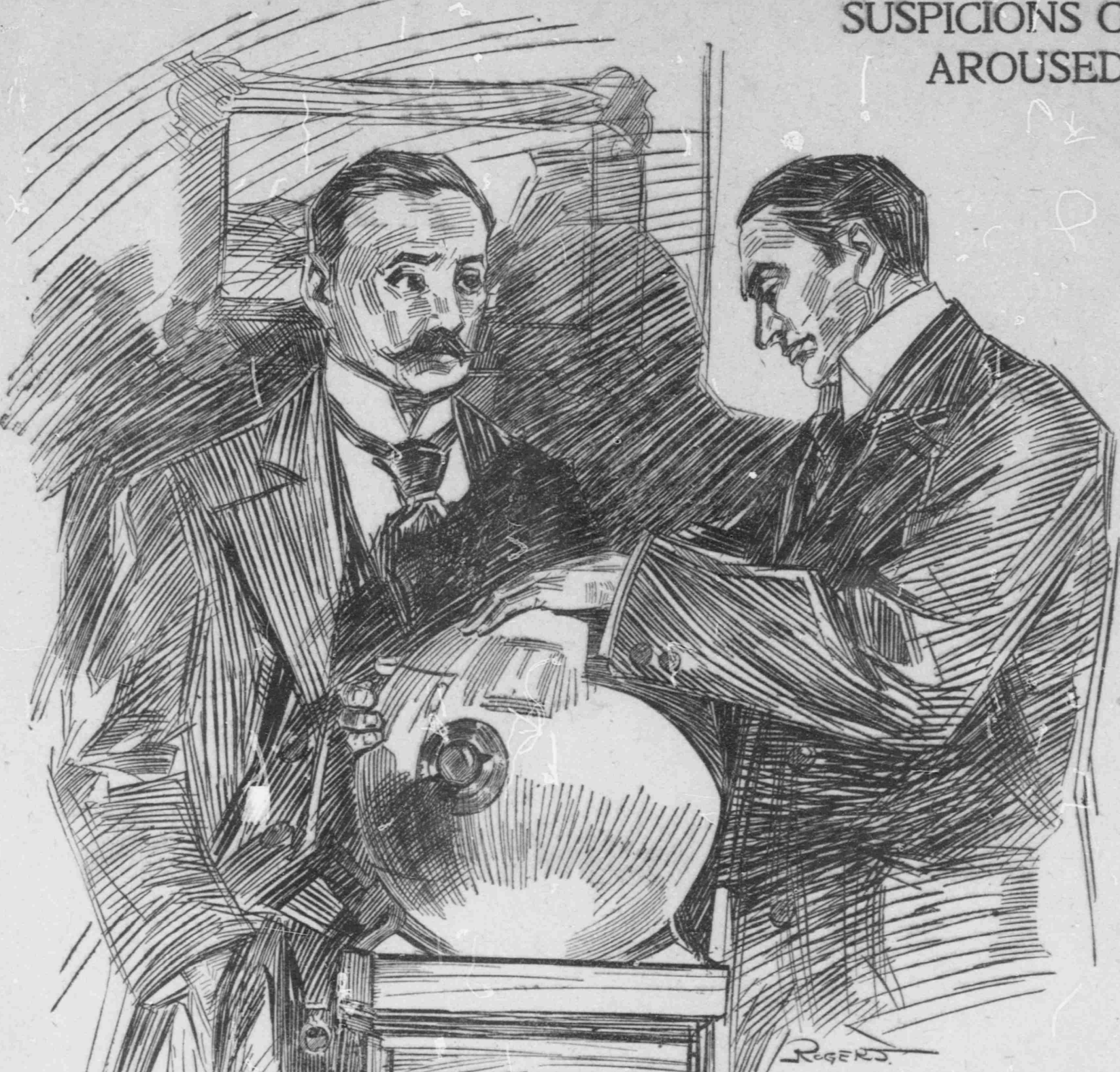
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"By George, That's a Beauty!" Cried Elsford. "Um! I Should Say It Was!" He Repeated, Standing Over the Polished Sphere.

do the same. Whatever it was, we needn't become excited about it."

"I know, but there was something peculiar about that flash of white; something so—well, if it was a reflection we shall see it again."

Grafton allowed the car to drop below the level of the big figure in the shaft, and then gently sent it upward again. They passed the figure and came to a stop when their former point had been reached. But the streak of white had failed to appear.

"Now, whatever that confounded thing may have been, it happened just that once. Oh, don't go to sniffing, Jim. The main thing I'm afraid of is that some of the electric wires may have crossed and taken to sparking. I'm going to get off here and have a little look about before we go up to the ninth. Coming?"

Elsford hesitated for a moment, and when he spoke it was half in a grumble.

"Your miserable enthusiasm about this place is unbalancing you, John. It's getting along to that time of night when respectable people crawl into bed. Get your investigation over with."

He stepped out to the floor.

"Well, I won't be more than a minute or two," said Grafton, "but I do want to know what that thing was. If the wires should happen to be crossed, you know, or anything of that sort—"

"The opened one or two of the fuse boxes in the walls, glancing along the line of plugs and sniffing for smoke."

He closed them again and surveyed the electroliners suspended from the ceiling. All was in perfect order.

"Um—" Grafton rubbed his chin.

"Nothing wrong there, apparently. Our white streak must, after all, have been some kind of reflection, but—"

It was queer, just the same, and I don't like queer things to happen in the Grafton building."

Grafton stepped back into the elevator and closed the sliding gate.

With his hand on the lever, he paused for a moment, still staring thoughtfully at the patch of wall where the white streak had made its mysterious appearance.

Then he threw back his head, and laughed.

"Well, by thunder!"

"Got your explanation?"

"Yes! And how infernally stupid of me not to have thought of it before!"

"Well?"

"Why, that streak of white was nothing more than a letter going down the chute! We simply saw the flash of the envelope as it passed the glass window that is on every floor."

"A letter?" said Elsford wonderingly.

"Of course."

"But at this hour—within a few minutes of midnight?"

Grafton frowned slightly.

"That part is odd, I'll admit," he said thoughtfully.

"They don't work all night in this remarkable town, do they?"

"Not as a general rule, I believe, but it isn't inconceivable that some one or another of the stenographers may have had an excess of work and been obliged to stop overtime to finish it."

"Maybe it isn't inconceivable, but it seems mighty unlikely that any one would be dicking away over a typewriter here at midnight."

The owner of the building, however, was ready to dismiss the problem.

"Unlikely or not, we'll have to believe what seems to be the fact—or assume that letters are posting themselves this evening."

Without a jar, the car crept to move, and Grafton slid back the gate.

"Ninth!" he called cheerily. "Now you shall see the executive den of the father of the town."

He led the way along the tiled way, switching on an incandescent lamp here and there, until at the end of the corridor a curtained glass door was reached. A jingling of keys and the door became a square of hazy darkness.

Grafton stepped in, and a moment later light blazed out from a dozen lamps in the center of his main office.

"Here's the outfit, Jim. How does it strike you?"

"It's all right," said Elsford. "What's this—the first one of this suite?"

"No, sir—the center one of the suite; another little den of mine. Instead of stringing the rooms out, I've just bunched the six small ones with this big fellow in the center. Then, when we want to go from one office to another there is no great amount of walking to be done. See?"

"There's the bookkeeper's establishment; over there the stenographers try to drown one another's racket; that door hides Johnson's den, my outside man, you know; that office belongs to Jennison, my right-hand man; over there you may see my own private room, and so on around."

A Matter of Seven Million.

"It's a mighty convenient arrangement. Come in and try the kind of leather chair we make in Kenyonville."

Elsford followed into the private office as the lights were turned on.

Grafton waved a hand at one of several big armchairs, and his companion dropped into it with a contented sigh.

"Easy, isn't it?" Grafton laughed, as he settled in his own desk chair.

"That factory started up three or four years ago, and was going to fail for want of capital. I—er—bought it."

"And you even control the chairs of the place?" laughed Elsford.

"Even the chairs. What do you think of the offices?"

"Splendid. Commodious, luxurious, and cool, and all the rest. By the way, John, it seems cooler in here than elsewhere."

"The ventilating system!" Grafton announced. "We keep the air about as fresh here as it's possible to be obtained anywhere."

Elsford nodded rather absently. His eyes were traveling with some astorism from detail to detail of the complete office equipment—the telephones and the call bells and the tiny white basin in the corner.

Grafton watched him with complacent satisfaction. At the end, Elsford wagged his head sagely, and smiled.

"About as complete as mortal man could wish," he commented. Then, with a sudden sniff, he added:

"And a man with all this luxury about him will still take to cigarette smoking?"

"What's that?" asked Grafton.

"I perceive you have succumbed to the allurements of the Turkish variety of the weed."

"Not I, Jim. What put that into your head?"

"Well, can't you smell it?" asked Elsford.

"The odor of cigarettes? No."

"You can't?" The visitor's nose went up again. "Well, it may possibly be my imagination, but—"

"It is," said Grafton. "I haven't come down to that as yet, and none of the clerks are permitted to smoke in here. However—"

He dismissed the subject with some impatience.

"Parker may have fallen from grace. Well, the establishment is satisfactory, then, is it?"

"Emphatically so!"

"And you never noticed my safe?" exclaimed the enthusiast, pointing to the small, impregnable ball of steel, standing upon its massive pedestal in the far corner.

"By George, that's a beauty!" cried Elsford. "Um! I should say it was!" he repeated, standing over the polished sphere. "And what is this particularly remarkable for, John?"

"For, several things. The price, for one, I won't mention it, even between ourselves and at midnight."

He smiled thoughtfully as his fond eyes rested upon the expensive bit of metal.

"Then it's remarkable on another account this evening, too."

"Easy, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. At the present moment that little ball holds all my

SUSPICIONS OF THE VISITING FRIEND AROUSED BY ODOR OF CIGARETTE,

But Grafton Is Optimistic and Scouts Fears of Elsford.

tinued. "I had an interview with Collins, my attorney, and he suggested that we look them over. Thereupon we went to the bank, obtained the precious little papers, examined them carefully, and—here they are."

Elsford's doubtful expression deepened. Grafton laughed.

"They're safe enough, you may depend. Like everything else in this person of an establishment, that little round vault is the best of its kind on earth. It's guaranteed against burglars, fires, mobs, cyclones—and the Lord only knows what else. And, considering the price I paid for it, the little thing might well be guaranteed against all other powers of earth and heaven in addition. They're safe enough."

"You seem to have infinite faith in your own contrivances and possessions, John."

"Bound to have, old man."

Elsford watched him for a time with a quiet smile.

"Do you know," he said, "that pride goes before a fall?"

"I've heard something of the sort before, but it isn't pride in my case—or, at least, not empty pride. Everything I've done since I landed in Kenyonville, and everything I've made or bought or built, has been the very best existent at the time. A man is entitled to be proud of that."

"But still, too confounded much confidence is as bad as the little, you know. Just about the time we get to feeling so absolutely certain of this or that—"

"She falls down, eh? You may be right."

Grafton tilted back and studied the ceiling.

"But with all your croaking," he added, "you just put in an appearance here at 12 noon, on the 21st day of this month—day after tomorrow, as I perceive that we are now past midnight—and I think you'll be convinced that all can go smoothly once in a while."

Was the Desk Open?

"What happens then?"

"Colson's settlement with me on the traction deal."

"Ah, yes."

"He'll be here, and Collins will be here," meditated Grafton, "and Elsford, and Phillips, the president of the company as it is at present organized. Then we'll have a small army of notaries and commissioners of deeds and a few clerks as witnesses, I presume—and when it's all over, yours truly, John Grafton, will be in a position to dispose of the mortgages and debts

which his public spirit prompted him to assume. And there, I think, his money-making career will stop for the present."

"Well, I trust sincerely that all will go as you expect."

"And why on earth shouldn't it?" demanded Grafton, with some impatience.

"Well, I don't know any logical reason, but—" Elsford broke off with a laugh, and yawned. "Imagine that my croaking mood may be due to weariness, John. It was a good long trip, coming here today, and we've been pretty busy since."

"And you're leaving early in the morning, too, aren't you?"

"My chair's hooked on the six-fifteen for St. Louis."

"Is it?" said Grafton. "Then it's high time you were getting some rest. We'll clear out of this."

Elsford nodded, and the other, after a glance about the trim little office, arose.

"Well, everything seems fit. Come along."

"You're learning caution from my croaking, I see."

"Eh? In what way?" Grafton's hand, resting upon the wall switch, dropped to his side.

"You closed your desk," said Elsford.

"That, at least, is a precautionary habit I usually observe when leaving, Jim."

"You didn't this evening."

"But I assure you that I did."

"And I assure you that you did not. When we entered this office your roll-top was wide open."

Grafton stared for a moment, then a smile came over his face.

"You seem to be keen for mysteries and unusual happenings this evening, Jim. But this one at least is going to fall through. As a rule, I'm the most methodical creature alive about office matters, but this evening, as I recall now, I did leave in a hurry. Your wire came only a minute or two before six, you know, and I wanted to hurry back to the house and down again to meet you. I did leave that desk top up."

"Ah!"

"But there was nothing of any earthly importance in it—and no one to see if there had been."

"Nevertheless, my boy, it demonstrates the fallibility even of yourself," laughed Elsford, with a little triumph in his voice. "Something simple might as well have happened to your precious safe over there."

"Shall I try the door?" said Grafton half mockingly, half wearily.

"Honestly, I wish you would."

The other stepped across and rattled the little knob